

## Statewide Education Organizing Committee – SEOC

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President Hernandez and Honorable Members  
State Board of Education  
Trenton, NJ

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My name is Dennis Brunn, I am a community organizer and the Director of the Statewide Education Organizing Committee, a membership organization of public school parents, grandparents, relatives and neighbors of public school children in Newark, Paterson, Jersey City and Asbury Park. We are members of the NJ Education Organizing Collaborative which includes the Paterson Education Fund, the Abbott Leadership Institute and the Education Law Center.

We have been working with and listening to parents concerns across the state for almost 10 years. We and many thousands of parents are extremely concerned, as are you, about the ongoing crisis in NJ secondary education. Our leaders have spoken at earlier Board meetings and many are here today again. We keep coming back because the so-called “reform” proposals coming to you from the Commissioner of Education are fundamentally flawed in our carefully considered opinion.

Why are the Proposals flawed? Basically, because they present no evidence that they will reach the desired result of higher graduation rates, substantially better prepared graduates, and more engaging and relevant learning. The proposals, further, claim that the entire set of new required courses and exit exams can be implemented without any additional educational dollars – a claim which cries out for examination by this Board. What the Proposals may very likely do – contrary to what the DOE has told you – is increase failure and discouragement and drop out rates especially in low-income urban districts, and further alienate a generation of new, dedicated teachers and parents who want very much for all children to graduate from high school with positive opportunities ahead.

We have absolutely no quarrel with the goals of the Commissioner’s Plan. We share these goals for radically improved secondary education experiences and results and, as an organization particularly representing the interests of children in the low-income districts, we know that no youth will benefit more from well implemented reforms than our children and youth.

What is really needed – instead of the Commissioner’s call for more required courses and more high-stakes tests -- to seriously address the secondary education crisis?

We do not claim to have all the answers – but we do claim that there is a growing body of experience and research around the country that indicates the general directions of serious reform. The elements are:



**(1) Parents, community leaders and institutions must be welcomed into the schools and into the rooms where reforms are designed and carried out.** Our involvement has been proven to work. There are examples of school systems that invite and use such partnerships. Smaller, well-run schools with close ties to the community are known to work better in places such as New York City, Boston, Providence R.I., and in Camden, NJ. Some Abbott-based school management teams (SMTs) have been successful in engaging many parents in joint efforts that have worked well – as the Department of Education no doubt has reported to you. If close partnerships with parents and the community can significantly help produce and sustain secondary reform, why can't NJ do this and be a leader in the field? Why start, instead, with more requirements and more high stakes testing?

**(2) Teachers should be empowered to design and carry out methods of teaching which attract, energize and support our youth as they prepare for adulthood.** Instead of encouraging teaching for the test, let's promote systems that encourage closer, long-term mentoring relationships between teachers and students, something the Commissioner's Plan, and earlier Secondary Education Initiative call for—but her Plan does not adequately support in the specific proposals before you.

**(3) School systems (not our youth) must be held accountable** for providing the full range of courses, the full range of supports, and adequate facilities for our children's education. Let's stop only testing our students and declaring them failures when the supports for their learning have NOT been provided. A first step toward this type of accountability would be for the Board to require the DOE to carefully evaluate, district by district, the actual implementation and impacts of Phase I which is already in place.

**(4) Schools must invite and support a voice for youth** and they must provide increased support through health, mental health, social service and tutoring programs (which is what the Abbott mandates have called for until the new School Funding Reform Act undercut these mandates).

**(5) School systems need systems to attract, prepare, hire and retain the very best teachers for our secondary schools.** For too long our systems have failed in this important area. Why can't the Board call upon the DOE to provide, first, an inventory, district by district, of the current supply of certified and qualified teachers of Biology, Algebra I and II, college-prep English and the other projected science requirements – before asking you to mandate that students successfully complete an expanded set of specific courses? Wouldn't mobilizing all our state's resources to supply that qualified teacher pool be the very first thing on a well designed reform plan?

**Finally, if there is one thing that the Board could do to protect our youth from rushed and poorly designed reforms it would be to require the insertion of a "Guarantee for Learning Opportunities for Youth,"** a clear statement that no youth will be denied graduation because of new requirements until you are assured by documents provided you by the DOE that the fundamental resources (prepared teachers, adequate materials and labs, proven parent/community engagement methods, and significant ways to engage both teachers and youth), are all in place.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns.